

Chapter 15

Cortés on the Aztecs: Two Letters to Charles V

(1521)
Hernando Cortés

Introduction

After Columbus and following explorers secured Spanish control over Cuba and other islands in the Caribbean, a wave of freelance adventurers (conquistadores) left Castile and crossed the ocean seeking to gain fortune for themselves and greater glory for their king and religion. In 1519, Hernando Cortés (1485-1547), along with around five hundred men, landed in Vera Cruz, Mexico, and prepared to attack the main power of the region, the Aztec empire. Along with a contingent of native warriors hostile to the Aztecs, Cortés entered Tenochtitlán (Mexico City) peacefully and met Emperor Montezuma II (1502-1520). More than 200,000 people lived in the Aztec capital at this time, making it one of the largest cities in the world. Montezuma's civil reception of the Spanish did not last long. The Spanish abducted the emperor and attacked the Aztecs during a religious ceremony that featured human sacrifice and cannibalism. Driven out in 1520, Cortés retook Tenochtitlán in 1521, all but destroying the architectural wonders of the city in the process. The Aztecs, decimated by smallpox, soon came under Spanish control, and Mexico became the core of New Spain, a region stretching from Panama to California.

Questions to Consider

- Imagine that you are Emperor Charles V. What might your reaction be after reading the description of Tenochtitlán in the letter from Cortés?
- How did Aztec religious practices provide justification to the Spanish for their conquest of Mexico?

This great city of Tenochtitlán is built on the salt lake.... It has four approaches by means of artificial causeways.... The city is as large as Seville or Cordoba. Its streets...are very broad and straight, some of these, and all the others, are one half land, and the other half water on which they go about in canoes.... There are bridges, very large, strong, and well constructed, so that, over many, ten horsemen can ride abreast.... The city has many squares where markets are held.... There is one square, twice as large as that of Salamanca, all surrounded by arcades, where there are daily more than sixty thousand souls, buying and selling...in the service and manners of its people, their fashion of living was almost the same as in Spain, with just as much harmony and order; and considering that these people were barbarous, so cut off from the knowledge of God and other civilized peoples, it is admirable to see to what they attained in every respect. [Second letter]

It happened...that a Spaniard saw an Indian...eating a piece of flesh taken from the body of an Indian who had been killed.... I had the culprit burned, explaining that the cause was his having killed that Indian and eaten him which was prohibited by Your Majesty, and by me in Your Royal name. I further made the chief understand that all the people...must abstain from this custom.... I came...to protect their lives as well as their property, and to teach them that they were to adore but one God...that they must turn from their idols, and the rites they had practised until then, for these were lies and deceptions which the devil...had invented.... I, likewise, had come to teach them that Your Majesty, by the will of Divine Providence, rules the universe, and that they also must submit themselves to the imperial yoke, and do all that we who are Your Majesty's ministers here might order them.... [Fifth letter]